

The RIGHTS of the POOR.

K Bentley

I.

THERE ought to be Free Schools instituted in all the parishes, or reasonable, convenient districts throughout the whole British Empire, where the poor children, of both sexes, whose parents are incapable, may be taught to read and write the Scriptures, *solely* at the national expence: as well with respect to food and cloathing, books and paper, &c. as the salaries of the teachers.—Indeed, this may perhaps be the proper business of the Clergy;—the Bishops, and other dignitaries to defray the charge of maintenance, and the lower orders to contribute the labour of teaching and instruction.

II.

Every poor child, of either sex, whose parents cannot or will not learn them some useful occupation or employment, whereby they may be enabled, to procure a reasonable subsistence; should be taken away from such parents at a proper age, by an act of government, and taught some honest way of living, at the public expence; or plac'd with proper Masters.

III.

All poor children whose parents or masters either cannot or will not bring them up in an industrious, honest, quiet, well-behav'd manner, shou'd be taken from such parents or masters by the magistrates of the parish; and either punished, or better instructed and brought up, as shall appear necessary, in places provided by the government:—such parents or masters as through negligence, idleness, or wickedness are found to be promoters of the same dispositions in their children or apprentices, to be either *immediately punished*, or *afterwards remembered* in the distribution of parish rewards or allowances.

IV.

As there are subscriptions and associations for the prosecution of thieves and robbers, when, upon conviction of facts, the law makes no allowance for necessity or distress, which might either *immediately* or *remotely* have stimulated to the commission of such crimes;—there ought to be also subscriptions and funds rais'd for the purposes of encouraging, rewarding and supporting sobriety, honesty, industry, quietness, a well-managed family, and whatever is modest, decent, virtuous, or praise worthy:—that persons so behaving may never want well-paid work,—that they may be visited occasionally by persons appointed,—that they may be cheer'd and animated in such a (*trying*) course by such gifts (of food, cloathing, or furniture) as may be thought necessary, reasonable, deserved, or christian like; and that at a time of need, a *wise distinction* may prove a daily sermon to all the poor in the parish.---Amputation may sometimes be useful as a *lesser evil*, but surely to *prevent* the necessity, and keep possession of a sound limb is better.

V.

The Poor ought to be *freely* heard and righted, in all reasonable petitions, complaints, or causes by the King, or his Judges, &c. in a summary way, in a court of conscience and equity (established in every market town) without being obliged to go through the tedious, expensive, ruinous forms which the present unfathomable, unknowable, uncertain laws require:—it is better, if necessary, that more Judges or Officers shou'd be appointed, rather than that multitudes shou'd suffer wrong for want of money to pay for justice!—of the truth of which assertion I myself have several times been an oppressed, deeply-feeling witness!—"He that ruleth over men must be just; ruling in the fear of God:" and it is as truly the duty of the King, by himself or his Justices or Judges, *freely* to hear, and *freely and speedily* to redress the wrongs of his *poor* subjects; as it is *their* duty to render him the obedience due to a crowned head.—No doubt but there are litigious, quarrelsome spirits in the world that wou'd sometime trouble a Judge without cause; (though perhaps if all the numberless quirks and shuffles and subterfuges and delays which are found out and occasion'd by adhering to the *letter* of the law, were abolished, so many of *those dispositions* wou'd not shew themselves as does at present) but be the case as it might, it is better that *two* frivolous causes shou'd be heard, than that *one* instance of wrong and oppression shou'd go unredress'd.

VI.

As the disproportion between the present prices of provisions and the wages of the poor is so exceedingly great, that multitudes of them are not able, even during health, strength, and the enjoyment of work, to earn the necessities of life; and much less able to save any thing to answer the calls of sickness, want of work, or old age: and as many of the trading part of the nation cannot afford to pay even what they already do towards the support of *infancy, sickness, and old-age*; much less to give bread to men and women, and youths and girls *who are able and willing to work*; but either cannot get work, or cannot *live* by it; therefore the Poor, and also the lower class of manufacturers and shopkeepers, and multitudes of poor tradesmen in general, have a *just* right (the labourer is worthy of a living) to these two things, first, the *immediate* opening of the ports for the *free* and *unlimited* importation of *all sorts* of provisions; and secondly, a *speedy, small* division and sale of ALL the waste lands in the kingdom, that they may be occupied and cultivated so far as possible, and trade by that means in some measure eased, which is highly necessary.

VII.

The Poor, who are one part of the Commons of the Realm, have a right to address the Representatives of the people upon the present unnatural and unreasonable disposition of the public money; the enormous salaries and Revenues annexed to most of the offices of Government, forming a very striking contrast to the very low incomes of multitudes, out of whom those Revenues are squeezed; many men with large families being obliged to work hard for six or seven shillings a week, and many widows and orphan girls for 18d. or two shillings per week: and the consequence is, that as equipages, diversions, and pride and luxury in general, increase among our rich men and rulers; so hunger and nakedness, poverty and wretchedness keep an equal pace among the poor, and lower orders.

May the Judge of all the Earth,—the Ruler of Kings, look upon their oppression and misery, and deliver them out of the hands of a proud, covetous, lying* *Ecclesiastical*---and an oppressive, profane, extravagant *Civil* government, for His promise sake!

* I believe if the charge of *idleness* also be added to the character of our clergy, the conduct of a very great majority of them will fully justify it:—indeed it is shocking to see, not only the *non-residence* of many Prelates, Rectors, Vicars, and Curates; but also the neglect, indifference, and disregard which most of the *residents* shew to the education and instruction of both the young and old of their parishes.

I know of a *living* which is worth about four hundred pounds per annum, and yet the people who pay it have but one sermon a week; and though the present incumbent keeps a school for the children of them who can pay him well, yet his *poor* parishioners may for him live and die as incapable of reading as they were when born!—and is not such a life exactly contrary to the whole tenor of the commands of God in the scriptures?—how earnestly did Moses exhort the Israelites to teach the laws of God to their children, and to write them upon their garments, walls, doors, and gates! that having them always before their eyes, it might be a *means* of continual obedience, and consequently of their preserving the favour of God; without which nothing could make them truly happy, and with which nothing could make them lastingly unhappy.—"Search the Scriptures," is also a *new-testament* command, (which command cannot be obeyed, at least not so *profitably* or *properly*, by them who cannot read;) and Paul reckons it a blessing to Timothy that *even from a child* he was able to read the Scriptures. There are indeed, species of *learning* (and some of them in great estimation in the world too) which had better have never been learnt, but I think no one will say this of sobriety, honesty, industry, hospitality, mercy, charity, chastity, wisdom, humility, temperance, truth, courage, friendship, gratitude, content, and such like, which is the teaching that shines throughout the Bible, and is so clearly, powerfully, awfully, engagingly, affectionately, repeatedly, and extensively to be found in no other book.

Eighty, and lastly.

I may add to this brief sketch of the rights of the sober, honest, industrious poor, that they have an equal right with the rich to the two privileges of divorcement, and an exemption from press-warrants;—their exclusion from which being no small part of that unmerciful, unreasonable bondage which the carelessness, covetousness, and cruelty of the British government, *both church and state*, lays upon them.

May God Almighty, even the author of the bible, and the Father of Jesus Christ, *speedily* and *effectually* plead their cause!

So prays

A seeker of Christianity,

THOMAS BENTLEY.

July, 1791.